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THE ENGLISH LEAFLET

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THE USE OF TESTS AND MEASUREMENTS IN THE TEACHING OF LITERATURE

By DR. C. A. COCKAYNE

Springfield Technical High School, Springfield, Mass.

As we look back over the history of education of the last twenty years, we are impressed by the general plasticity of everything educational. Courses of study have been frequently revised. Our educational aims have been re-defined. Methods of teaching have been radically changed. Our administrative organizations have been altered. Nothing has remained immune to this general upsetting of the old conventional ways of doing things.

Some of the changes that have been made undoubtedly mark real progress, while others have proved to be mere fads, and, as such, they have already been abandoned. The gradual elimination of the fads, accompanied by the melting away of false enthusiasms, has led to a growing conservatism among teachers. Belief in old-time methods has been strengthened, and complacency over established practices has grown.

Thus, the use of scales for the measurement of results in the classroom, introduced only ten years ago, has been regarded with suspicion and skepticism. And some of our best teachers, convinced of the human, personal character of their work, have feared that the introduction of standard tests and measurements would tend to mechanize and materialize the culture of spirit.

There are many other good grounds on which actual opposition to the use of tests has been based. In the first place, scales require a peculiar technique, a technique in which many teachers have had no training. Without a knowledge of this technique, the use of scales is almost impossible. And secondly, tests require considerable time and often delay the regular work of the school. They are cumbersome and require the gathering of statistics and the making of elaborate reports. And thirdly, when a teacher has sacrificed much to get these reports, she often finds the results very meagre and of little value for the task she has before her. And again, some scales that have been devised have had serious defects: they have been unscientific and unreliable. The attempt to use such tests has usually led the inexperienced teacher to discouragement and failure.

Opposition to the use of scales has been especially strong among teachers of English. Literature is a fine art, and the reactions sought through the study of literature are emotional, moral, aesthetic. The fruits of such study can be measured only in later years by the kind of life that grows out of it. How, then, can any means of scientific measurement tried in the classroom give results of any real value? You may measure degrees of skill, perhaps, and test knowledge, but you cannot reduce to mechanical terms the soul of literature.

The reasons which seem to justify rejection of scientific methods in the teaching of literature serve indeed to emphasize the great need of such methods. If we accept literature as life reflected through linguistic art, we must admit that its very bigness and complexity will often give rise to vagueness and indefiniteness. If we, who have had the advantage of higher training, find new meaning and fresh beauty every time we re-read the old classics, will not our teaching be too often the attempt to give our pupils our own partial, prejudiced impressions? We must remember, in this connection, that teachers of literature are probably more temperamental than are the teachers of more matter-of-fact

subjects. While this is certainly not to be regarded as a disqualification, the fact remains that persons who are temperamental are more likely to be subjective in their judgments. And, as we all know, subjective judgments are less likely to be accurate than those that are based more largely on objective considerations. It is not difficult to understand the amazement of the high school boy who received a zero for his elaborate answer to the teacher's direction, "Tell all you can about Sydney Carton." He had been unable to guess the particular things the teacher had in mind.

Grading of some sort in literature is essential. The defects of the old method are quite apparent. A scheme, then, that will enable us to secure greater definiteness in any respect in the teaching of literature is greatly needed. When the new experimental psychology was introduced, the psychologists of the old school cried out that experimental psychology was a psychology without a soul and therefore no psychology at all. But most of our advances in psychological science in the last half century have come from the use of the experimental method. May not the objection raised to the use of tests and measurements in teaching literature, as subversive of the real purpose of teaching literature, be compared to the objection once raised to experimental psychology?

After all, it is not so much aesthetic appreciation or moral value that is measured by the tests so far devised—those of Professor Allan Abbott of Columbia University seem to be an exception—as it is the learning process. Of the possibility of measuring the learning process there can be no question, for in literature emotional response depends primarily on rational comprehension, upon the grasp of idea. In his little volume on "Principles of Aesthetics," Professor Dewitt Parker analyzes the aesthetic experience into its elements as follows: simple sensations; simple feelings that arise from these sensations; ideas; emotions that grow out of these ideas; and the concrete imagery in terms of which

the experience is thought. If we can measure the grasp of the ideas, which form a basic element in all aesthetic experience, we shall be able to do much to eliminate vagueness from instruction in literature. In this respect literature as a fine art differs from music, since the element of idea present in the latter is much less determinate.

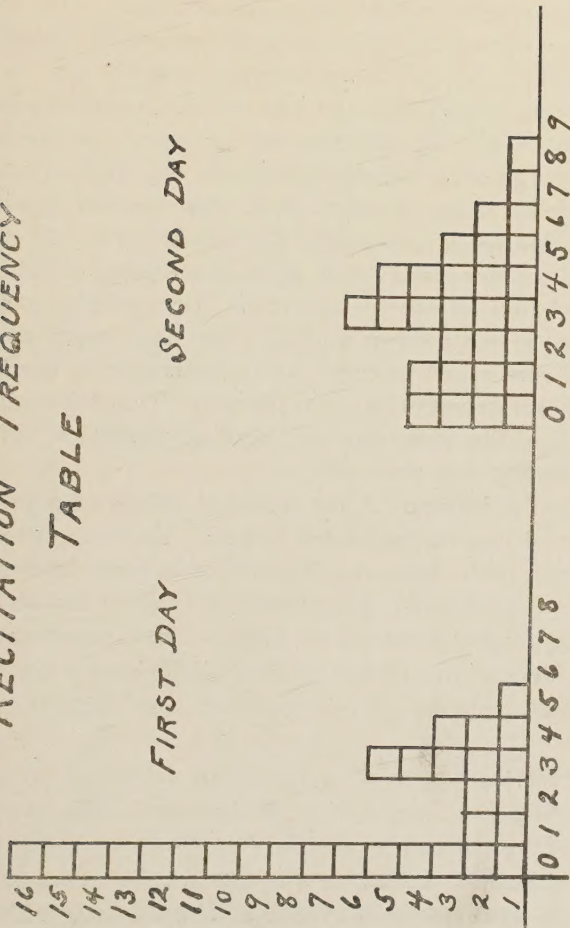
Nothing, however, is so convincing of the possibility and of the practical value of tests and measurements in the teaching of literature as the actual results that have already been secured. Lack of space prevents discussion of more than two. The first is one that may be applied to any recitation, whether in literature, science, or any other subject. At the close of a recitation, the teacher questions her class concerning the number of times each member has recited during the period. She then constructs a graph on the board to show the result. See figure 1. On the first day, out of a class of twenty-nine, sixteen failed to recite at all. Other recitations were distributed as shown. The class could see at once that this record indicated a very poor class exercise, since less than half the class had taken an active part in the recitation. When the teacher called for a similar report at the close of the recitation period the next day, she found the result as indicated in the second part of the graph.

Figure 2 represents the results of a series of tests for speed in silent reading. The teacher prepared for each test by giving the class a short introduction to the material to be read so that they might have sufficient background to make comprehension and appreciation possible. She also called attention to all difficult words, making their meaning perfectly clear in advance. Sometimes, she gave out a few questions the answers to which were to be found in the selection about to be read. She cautioned them against using the lips and against all forms of vocalizing, which would tend to retard speed. Then the signal was given and all read for exactly two minutes.

RECITATION FREQUENCY TABLE

FIRST DAY

SECOND DAY



NUMBERS ON SIDE REPRESENT PUPILS

NUMBERS BELOW REPRESENT RECITATIONS

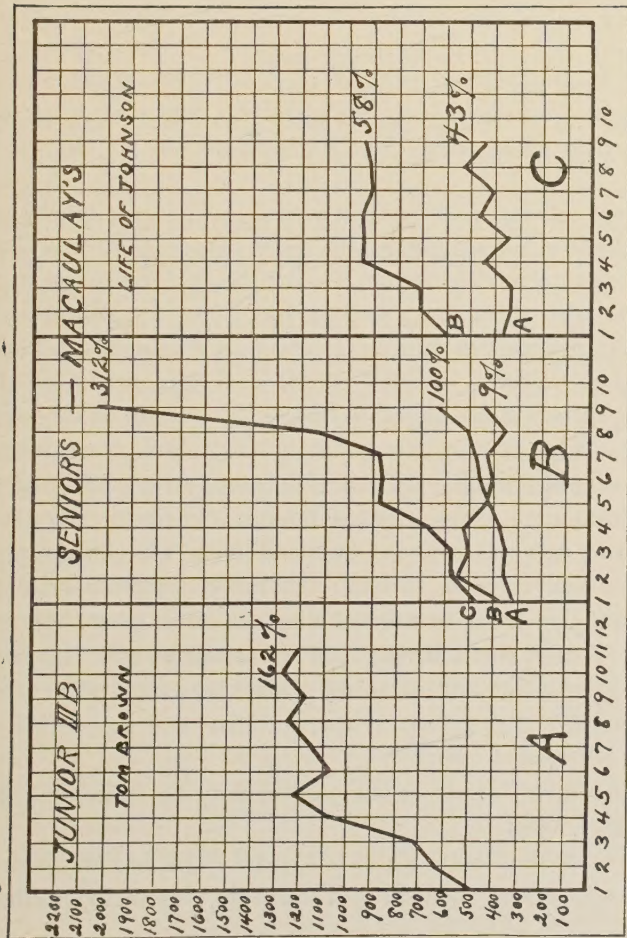
At the end of the two minutes, all stopped at once and counted the number of lines read. This number was multiplied by the average number of words in a line. This gave the number of words read in two minutes. This number was divided by two to get the rate per minute.

After each reading period of two minutes, comprehension was tested. This was done in various ways. Sometimes, the test was an oral one, the member of the class who had read the least being called on first, then another member who had read more, and finally the member who had read most. Sometimes the test was given in the form of definite questions based on the section read. Occasionally, pupils were asked to write down all topics that they could recall, and then were asked to check up by reference to the text and grade themselves in terms of percent. The oral method, however, had the advantage of affording discussion before further reading was done.

In section A of figure 2, the record is shown of a Junior High School boy reading *Tom Brown*. He became interested at once in the method and practiced at home by having his parents time him and then hear him report what he had read. His improvement was rapid. The comparatively slight variations after he had reached his high level are only normal, since degrees of concentration vary from time to time.

In section B of figure 2, is shown the record of a senior class reading Macaulay's *Life of Johnson*. The average number of words read by the class on the first reading was 319. On the last reading it was 640 words. This shows an average improvement for the class of 100% in 9 readings. Line A represents the poorest record made by a member of the class, while line C represents the best record, showing an improvement of 312%.

Section C of figure 2 gives the record of one member of the class reading Macaulay for both speed and comprehension. As speed improved, the student was able to reproduce



NUMBERS ON SIDE REPRESENT NUMBERS OF WORDS
NUMBERS BELOW REPRESENT READING PERIODS

more of the thought. The greatest improvement in speed was 43%; while the improvement in grasp of thought was 58%. This illustrates the principle that grasp of thought improves with speed because of the higher degree of concentration with which the mind works. When a speed is reached that gives the student 100% of the thought, the maximum of efficiency has been attained. Increase in speed beyond that point would likely result in loss of comprehension.

The use of tests and measurements, then, in the teaching of literature is not a passing fad. Too many definite results have been attained already. The day has passed when any educator, no matter how learned and wise, can dogmatize about educational procedure. Scientific experiment in education has already justified itself, and our methods of teaching in future are bound to rest on the results of investigations made in the classroom under ideal conditions. These will not diminish the inspiration that strong personalities give to their classes, but will give it definite direction and insure definite results. Teachers with less gifted personalities will be able, through the more objective results of scientific method, to raise their work to a much higher standard. And further, perhaps the teacher will become less of a preacher and more of a teacher, kept sufficiently in the background to permit the initiative and self-activity of pupils to assert itself.

Further information on the subject may be found in the following books:

The vocabulary test is given in *Mental Tests and Measurements* by Lewis M. Terman, published by Houghton, Mifflin Co.

The method of presenting silent reading is most admirably presented in *Silent Reading* by John Anthony O'Brien, published by The Macmillan Company; also in *The Measurement of Silent Reading* by May Ayres Burgess, published by the Russell Sage Foundation.

The discussion of Literature as a fine art is given in *The Principles of Aesthetics* by DeWitt Parker, published by Silver, Burdett & Co.

THE DECEMBER MEETING

THE discussion of tests and measurements by Dr. C. A. Cockayne of Springfield Technical High School contained so many practical suggestions that we feel sure the *Leaflet* readers will be glad to have the abstract of his report showing the definite results obtained by the use of scales in the class-room.

Professor John Livingston Lowes of Harvard in his address on "The Teacher's Reading, Professional and (Especially) Otherwise," urged that teachers read widely for the two-fold purpose of gaining a thorough knowledge of the classics and to make themselves human beings. He spoke of the two groups in the profession; those who are scholars but cannot teach, and those who can teach but are not scholars. The greatest teachers are those who combine the two elements.

He drew many of his illustrations from his own experience in tracing the reading of Coleridge, urging his auditors to follow the poet's methods, showing how a vast field of knowledge was opened up by reading the references suggested. He spoke of the value to teachers of reading the originals of what they are trying to teach, suggesting the desirability of first-hand impressions through catching the atmosphere of the masterpiece rather than by reading about the man or book.

This background of knowledge, though much of it is never used in the classroom, gives power that stimulates the work and inspires the pupil.

In addition to reading that might be classed as professional, Professor Lowes made a strong plea for reading that is entirely unconnected with this work, for, he said, the real teacher is first of all a human being.

THE BOSTON CONFERENCE ON THE ENGLISH ENTRANCE EXAMINATIONS OF JUNE, 1921.

IN PREPARATION for the Entrance Examination Conference, held in Boston on December 10, fifty readers of the June papers were invited to send to the chairman answers to these questions:

1. Were the examinations too long?
2. Were any questions unreasonably hard?
3. What questions were especially good?
4. Was the comprehensive paper too comprehensive?
5. Why did so many pupils fail?
6. Who should take the Comprehensive test?
7. What about the grammar on the A. B. paper?
8. Did the A. B. paper demand tutoring,—“cramming?”

Twenty-seven replies were received. Most of the questions were answered by “Yes” or “No.” Number 5, however, drew forth some lengthy and a few most vigorous essays. Here is the gist of a few:

WHY DID SO MANY PUPILS FAIL?

1. “Because of the coddling process to which our high schools are addicted! No Latin, no Greek, no intensive study of the English classics, no English grammar,—nothing hard!”

2. “Because candidates are not trained in the fundamentals of accuracy. They are not accurate in spelling, nor in punctuation, nor in the elementary process of arranging their thoughts.”

3. Many fail because “they have not read the books thoroughly or intelligently. Their impressions are about as hazy as one might expect from the butterfly and movie-minded youth of today.”

4. “Whole groups of candidates,—evidently from certain schools,—were handicapped by the fact that they had been taught absolutely no grammar.”

5. “Undoubtedly many failed because they were not really college timber. The majority of those who would benefit by a college education pass.”

6. "Some of the failures are chargeable not so much to teaching which is the teacher's fault as to conditions for which the school and even the community are to blame. When school principals give the English teachers the right facilities for doing their work, including a decent amount of leisure for mental and spiritual refreshment, then we shall have fewer failures."

To your chairman the most significant fact about the twenty-seven replies is this:

The readers of last June's papers who teach in colleges seem to be perfectly satisfied with all the questions on the examinations. Readers from private schools grumble a bit at a question here and there, but on the whole they are well pleased. Readers from public high schools almost unanimously express dissatisfaction or decided protest.

During the two hours of the Conference itself sixteen teachers of English spoke upon different aspects of last June's examinations. Others expressed their opinions at the Lunch Club immediately after. From these sources, and also from letters which he has received since December 10th, your chairman has drawn the following suggestions. Unfortunately it is impossible to say just how many teachers would agree with each one of these pronouncements: They seem, on the whole, to express the sense of the meeting.

1. For many students who write slowly the papers were too long. By actual computation there was not enough time for planning and revising answers. To be sure, many candidates finished before the three hours were up; but others were so hurried that they could not do their best work. If the examinations are really meant to find out whether the candidates are ready to do college work, there seems to be no good reason why they should not be given as much time as they need. The meeting voted unanimously that shorter tests would serve as well as those given last June.

2. The selections for paraphrasing on the Comprehensive paper were rather too difficult for boys and girls of eighteen.

(This criticism would apply to other years as well as to 1921.) Such selections should be taken from books nearer the pupil's experience and should be of simpler character.

3. The subjects for the long essays were in general approved. Several suggested that for boys going to scientific institutions there should always be one or two definitely scientific subjects. Many believed that the essay question should stand first and not last on the examination.

4. A number of teachers complained bitterly of the limited arrangement of the papers, and also of the phrasing of certain questions,—especially of the use of the words "theme" and "composition."

5. Question No. 3 on the Restricted Examination (A. B.) was judged unfit,—one of the poorest ever set. Scott, Tennyson, Coleridge, Browning, and Arnold are read, not studied, early in the high school course when "qualities of style" make too slight an impression to hold over to the end of the senior year.

6. The grammar on the Restricted Paper was the chief object of attack. It was declared technical, catchy, and ambiguous. Teachers themselves,—and several correctors,—admitted that they were in doubt about those "five subordinate clauses."

In conclusion, two facts are clear: (1) Everyone seems satisfied with the handling of the correcting in New York. It is evidently done with care, sympathy, and justice. (2) Many public high school teachers of English are decidedly *not* satisfied with the care and justice of those who make and arrange the questions on the examinations.

SAMUEL THURBER

A SUCCESSFUL CONFERENCE GROUP

[The following paragraphs explain in some detail the working plans of a most successful group of Local Conferences. The North Worcester District of Massachusetts is leading the way in this vital matter of getting together in small groups to talk shop pleasantly over crackers and cheese and something warm to drink.]

THE first meeting of the North Worcester District of English teachers was held in Fitchburg, October fifth. There are fourteen towns in our group, the largest being Fitchburg.

Our plan for this year is to have the first and last meetings here. We began with a supper, and we invited a speaker who gave us the stimulus necessary for the year's work. We expect to end with a similar meeting, and to have an address which shall be a fitting climax. The talk and discussion at our first meeting touched upon various phases of English work, minimum essentials, college examinations, better speech week, correcting of papers, and thus suggested many practical topics for future gatherings.

At this meeting of the entire group, we divided the towns into four districts, with a chairman for each. We have found this advisable as the neighborhood includes scattered villages, which can more easily unite for frequent conferences, and thus interest more persons in the Round Table. We expect to have at least two meetings, for these smaller groups, making four for the year. Each chairman may have as many more as he desires, but this suggestion is given, so that he may not feel at a loss.

We endeavor to *advertise* our first meeting to the best advantage. We send word to all the principals of the Schools as well as to the English teachers. In small schools this is, of course, necessary. We call attention to the meeting in the local press, explaining its motive, and connecting it with the New England Association, so that it may have the sanction of a large and well-known organization. We insist that the program shall *not be too long*. We advise having the meetings on a school day, and suggest that there shall be a luncheon or a supper. We have found that for our groups, which are, as a whole, isolated from the main centre of Boston, it is better to have some one from outside our immediate vicinity as a guest. This may not be necessary in larger places, but each school, with us, is quite by itself; each town has its own limitations, and needs to feel a connection with the outside world, as well as to know the other teachers from the towns immediately surrounding it.

There are two objects to be worked for in our particular district: first, to do away with the feeling of isolation, which every town and small city possesses; second, to foster, in a very practical way the spirit of union with the state and national body of men and women who are working for

the same ends, and to make every one believe that he or she is really wanted in those organizations, not as a spectator, but as a co-worker. If our local neighborhood conferences are a success, we go to Boston for the general meetings of the New England Association, no longer as an admiring auditor of a distant acquaintance on the platform, but as a friend and neighbor of a group of people whose very presence gives us courage to believe that we, too, have a share in solving the problems of the hour.

HELEN STRATTON
Chairman of North Worcester
Local Conferences

[Teachers who are interested in forming local English clubs might do well to correspond with Miss Helen Stratton, High School, Fitchburg, Mass.; With Miss Katharine U. Pierce, English High School, Providence, R. I.; or with Samuel Thurber, Newtonville, Mass.,—the chairman of the Local Conference Committee of our Association.]

WEST OF BOSTON ENGLISH CLUB

A PLEASANT and profitable meeting of the West of Boston English Club was held on December 15 in the library of the Newton Technical High School with twenty-two teachers from these schools present: Brookline, Belmont, Natick, Newton, Waltham, Watertown, Wellesley, and Weston. After a social half-hour of talk, sandwiches, doughnuts, cheese, and coffee, the members discussed informally various questions concerning the college entrance examinations, which had arisen at the Boston Meeting on December 10. Four points upon which all seemed to agree were:

1. Our drive for greater accuracy in spelling, punctuation, and sentence construction must begin early in the grades. We cannot do it all in the high-schools. To that end we must hold conferences with grammar school teachers to solicit their co-operation; for they, as well as we, are responsible for the present exaggerated emphasis upon fluency, interest, and cleverness at the expense of correct expression.

2. Every teacher in the high-school must become an English teacher. Unless our pupils are held to their best in *all* that they write, our time spent in correcting themes

is practically wasted. (It seemed to be generally agreed that at present almost nothing is being done in this matter of intelligent co-operation for better English.)

3. Extra curriculum activities,—debates, dramatics, school-paper, declamations, etc,—are an increasing menace to effective preparation for the entrance examinations. English teachers must either be relieved of some of these responsibilities or their number of pupil-hours must be materially decreased.

4. The times are out of joint for developing literary taste and scholarly accuracy of expression. Many of our college candidates read of their own accord absolutely nothing. They are devoted to sport, pleasure, movies, automobiles. We are not able in four or five forty-minute periods a week to set these matters right. The amazing fact is that so many of our "students" pass the English entrance examinations at all!

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Very truly yours,

H. M. Ellis

Professor of English

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